

This is the unedited version of a column which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in 2002. The published version may have had minor changes.

### **Media Bites: Health is world news**

Most journalists who cover health and medicine do so from the comfort of our offices, with the phone, internet and computer our main tools of trade. Sometimes we venture to conferences or press conferences, sometimes we watch operations or other procedures, and sometimes we interview people face-to-face.

Generally speaking, we have a pretty narrow view on the world. That's why Laurie Garrett, the medical and science writer for *Newsday*, a newspaper based in New York City, stands head and shoulders above the rest of us.

Her beat is that usually covered by international correspondents. But when Garrett travels to Africa, India or Siberia, she is reporting about health, albeit health in the broadest possible sense. She looks at its political, social and economic aspects, as well as the medical side.

You probably heard of Garrett several years ago when her best seller, "The Coming Plague", about the threat of new and re-emerging infectious diseases, won international acclaim.

Her new book, "Betrayal of Trust: The collapse of global public health" (recently released in Australia by Oxford University Press, \$69.95), is another outstanding piece of health journalism.

Whether analysing a plague outbreak in India, rising death rates in countries of the former Soviet Union or the "shambles" of public health infrastructure in the US, Garrett engages the reader by telling personal stories while putting them in a broader perspective.

She also left this reader feeling quite alarmed, and not just by her central thesis, that the world is ill-equipped to deal with public health crises at a time when globalisation brings greater connections between far flung countries, for better or worse.

What this book also left me wondering is whether the media has the capacity to investigate such problems in a sustained, informed manner -

to go beyond the sensational headlines about another Ebola outbreak, and examine the political and social factors which contributed.

Garrett made much the same point when she addressed the 13th International AIDS conference in South Africa a few years ago: that the media, in both the developed and developing world, is not confronting the important global issues in its health reporting.

“In the wealthy world most media organisations - newspapers, radio, online - have in the last few years been gobbled up by large corporations. It's very rare now in the wealthy world to run across family-owned, large media operations,” she said.

“And what that means is that now our media bosses expect us to meet a bottom line, a certain profit margin, a given stock market flow. And in order to do so we have to be catchy, be there twenty-four hours a day, be there all of the time.

“And what suffers in the atmosphere of immediacy is analysis. What suffers in this search for speed is depth. The media in the wealthy world are becoming increasingly simplistic, superficial, and celebrity-focused.”

Meanwhile, Garrett continued, in the developing world much of the media is government-owned or tightly controlled: “The infrastructure of media in the southern hemisphere is generally pretty poor and it takes a lot of guts to be a reporter in most of the developing world.”

Garrett learnt this the hard way. In 1988, she was addressing another AIDS conference when she praised a Kenyan journalist for his courageous reporting at a time when the word AIDS was barely mentioned in his country.

As she left the podium, a Kenyan scientist told her, "You just signed his death warrant". The journalist was arrested later that day, but Garrett and others eventually were successful in securing his release.

Garrett rightly acknowledges she is lucky to have an employer prepared to fund her trips to distant locations to write about public health. But she has also shown exceptional courage and determination. It is not surprising that her CV lists pages of prestigious journalism and health

awards, and that her on-line diary is booked up months in advance with speaking engagements.

Remarkably, Garrett has managed to produce such a huge volume of work without being able to work a keyboard. She has such severe RSI that she cannot type and relies on others to do this for her.

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